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ABSTRACT

Recent studies show that training in oral communication skills is one of the primary needs of industry. Among those skills are listening, persuading, and instructing. One reason that oral communication skills are becoming increasingly important is that business, industrial, and government organizations are larger and more complicated than they were 20 or 30 years ago so that employees must work together with more and more people. Another is that the diversity in the American work force requires that one be a skilled communicator. Business educators can implement a number of strategies in their basic business communication classes to make oral communication an integral part of their classes. First, students should be encouraged to talk in class as early as the first meeting. Second, students should give short presentations to the class as it progresses through its first weeks, although these do not necessarily have to be assigned letter grades. Third, grades should be given on formal oral presentations during the final weeks of class. Fourth, one of the short presentations should be videotaped and evaluated by peers. Fifth, listening skills should be incorporated as an important part of oral communication. Finally, teacher's lesson plans should allow for impromptu speaking opportunities. These strategies will improve a basic business communication course by making it more exciting and significant. (DF)

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IMPROVING ORAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS IN THE BASIC BUSINESS COMMUNICATION COURSE

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How can students be trained to be self-assured when giving oral presentations? Should a student receive a failing grade because of an inability to overcome anxiety? How can students improve interpersonal communication skills? These questions take on new meaning when we realize that the ability to communicate capably and convincingly is one of the principle ingredients for employment in industry today.

After examining the communication needs of business and reviewing the literature, this article will investigate the importance of skill in oral communication, and offer some suggestions for incorporating oral communication training into the basic business communication course. This information will help instructors improve a course which must concentrate primarily on teaching communication theory, memo and letter writing, and report writing--referred to here as the basic business communication course.

ORAL COMMUNICATION NEEDS OF BUSINESS

People holding managerial and clerical positions today commonly have to speak before large and small groups, often without advance notice. Also they may be in demand for formal presentations. Skill in presenting formal presentations which require much preparation and information, talks which may demand that the speaker talk extemporaneously, and skill in one on one conversation, will make the students more saleable when they begin the job search.

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Additionally, the literature supports the argument for more attention to building speaking competencies. Madeline (1980) illustrated the need in strong terms by writing that the ability to communicate clearly, effectively, persuasively--to gain understanding, and hopefully, allegiance--should be at the top of the list of the list of skills developed by every careerist who wants to get anywhere near the top of most institutions in this country--government, business, education, what have you.[1]

Further, Cushing (1980) referred to the study, Basic Skills in the U.S. Work Force, which quoted businesses and unions as identifying speaking/listening skills as one of the most frequent deficiencies. He pointed out that the costs of the deficiencies are astronomical in terms of mistakes made and the need for retraining.[2]

Other studies also identified the need for increased attention to communication training as one of the primary needs of industry. As reported by Rudolph and Johnson (1983) a survey commissioned by the SCA Educational Policies Board documented the importance of communication skills for entry level workers. Rudolph and Johnson referred to other examples of in-house communication training programs sponsored by various businesses. Recent business school graduates and even the more experienced executives can benefit from on-the-job communication training from either in-house programs run by company trainers or from outside consultants. They cited literature which showed that companies were spending a good deal of money for these courses. For example, Communispond Inc. in New York charges $8,500 for a two-day program to train 20 executives with two instructors and a TV operator. Communispond serves nearly one-fourth of the FORTUNE 500 companies as occasional customers.[3]

Interesting to note were the areas which should receive the focus of communication training as perceived by business. Shaw and Caplette reported

information about interviews with six managers trained to teach the Interpersonal Managing Skills (IMS) program at the Lockheed Missles and Space Company. A highly structured, packaged program, IMS teaches five communication skills: crediting or providing positive feedback, clarifying and confirming ideas before making decisions, providing constructive criticism, building or adding value to an idea, and managing differences of opinions.[4]

These reports and other studies in the literature substantiate the need for oral communication training. A look at some research which lists specifics of the type of oral training desired may reinforce this training emphasis.

In a study summarizing over 45 studies of the communication needs in a large variety of organizations, DiSalvo, Dunning, and Homan concluded that "communication is one of the (if not the) most important aspects of one's organization activity. Proficiency in various communication skills is essential, required and expected; is often valued above technical expertise or skills; and is likely to play a more important role in promotions." The study specifically found seven skills to be most important for the individual planning to pursue a business or organizational career. These seven skills, based on a summary of the 45 studies, are: (1) listening, (2) writing, (3) oral communication, (4) persuasion and motivation, (5) group problem solving, (6) interviewing and (7) interpersonal competency.[5]

A variety of communication skills are important to specific jobs. These skills were identified in the DiSalvo, Larsen and Seiler (1975) study aimed at identifying the communication skills needed by recent college graduates in business organizations. On the basis of their survey, the authors concluded that ten types of communication skills were important to job success:

1. Advising
2. Persuading
3. Instructing
4. Interviewing
5. Routine information exchange
6. Public speaking
7. Small group leadership
8. Giving orders
9. Small group problem solving
10. Listening[6]

Based on similar findings from a 1982 survey of post-secondary institutions and corporate management education programs, Hahn of the Harvard Graduate School of Education has developed an "Inventory of General Learning Goals of Management." There is an emphasis on communication skills in the top ten rankings of 25 general learning goals in industry management education:

Rank Order	General Learning Goal
1.5	To develop ability to transact easily and productively with others
1.5	To develop ability to think critically about received ideas
3	To develop ability to balance conflicting viewpoints
4	To develop ability to listen effectively
5	To develop ability to communicate ideas orally
6	To develop self-confidence and self-esteem
7	To develop tolerance and trust in relations with others
8	To develop self-awareness and self-understanding
9	To develop capacity for self-evaluation
10	To develop capacity for assuming responsiblity[7]

The studies cited here provide groundwork for structuring the oral communication component of the training that business administration students should receive before graduation. However, many four-year institutions presently offer one business communication course in the Division of Business which all business students must take. It is difficult indeed to make a case for teaching all of the oral communication categories or even many of them in one class of basic business communication.

Much needs to be done before the needs of industry and the college training programs coincide. Adkins (1980) completed a study where the major purpose was to determine if any significant differences in perceptions of a selected number of business communication skills and knowledges necessary for employment existed among businesspersons, business communication teachers, and business communication students in Kentucky. The analysis of the data revealed

that a significant difference in perceptions did exist between the businesspersons and teachers, between the businesspersons and the students, and between the teachers and the students. The data that was collected indicated a need for a better businessperson-teacher-student relationship for the purpose of discussing the business communication skills and knowledges needed in business.[8]

Some changes in the way the course is taught might be indicated or the indication may be that there is a need for an additional course to handle the oral communication training demands of business.

IMPORTANCE OF SKILL IN ORAL COMMUNICATION

Many employees, even those who have considerable work experience, usually underestimate the importance of skill in communication in building their careers. Business students as well as business people may pass it off as something one handles intuitively. Communication skill is treated somewhat like human relations skills, and like human relations skill, high personal productivity will not provide career success without good communication skill.

Developing communication skill is important because it results in improved articulation of ideas, expression of feelings, and negotiation abilities. Here are some other reasons why oral communication skill is important.

1. Business, industrial and government organizations are large and more complicated than they were twenty or thirty years ago. Formerly employees did not have to concern themselves with the complex personal skills that are needed today. Now they must learn to work together with more and more people.

2. Communication skills are more important today because there are more people employeed in service work which requires a great deal of interpersonal relations. The entire organization may have to work with the public and, therefore, will need high level communication skills.

3. If employees are to increase productivity, they must work better with the people closely associated with them. This neccesitates greater competence in communication skill.

4. Finally, the diversity of cultures in the American work force requires that one be a skilled communicator.

IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES

Business educators can make oral communication an integral part of the basic business communication class from the first day of class. The following strategies, based largely on personal experience and advice from other business communication teachers, should help the novice to guide business students to conquer the frightening aspects of speaking before others and lead them to self confidence in small group interrelations.

1. Start on the first day. Since practice is the foundation upon which communication skill is built, require that students introduce themselves in a two or three minute talk. Prepare them thoroughly by discussing what they will talk about and how they will organize. The introduction will come first; the details about hobbies, major courses, or occupational plans will form the body; and finally there should be a closing statement. This exercise will relax the class and put them in a posture for further oral presentations. The length of time may vary depending on the size of the class, but the structure should remain the same.

2. Continue through the first weeks of class. A relatively easy talk is one taken from the course subject matter. For example, students may explain one of the course topics--sales letter composition or format of letters, for instance. Of course, it will be necessary to schedule only a few presentations each class period so that there will be adequate time for teacher presentations

to augment the student information about the subject matter. Where at least 30 students are enrolled, an authentic anxiety-raising experience results from these presentations. Generally, an intimacy develops with smaller groups which may not be an advantage for this type of training.

Arrange to have students experience a minimum of two of these presentations. Relieve some of the tension by giving grades such as ✓+ (very good), ✓ (just fine), or ✓- (needs improvement) for the first assignment. Critique the presentations along with the members of the class. Keep in mind the special sensitivities of those being critiqued. During the first assignment, letter grades should be reserved for the written assignments which accompany these presentations.

When carefully scheduled, these teacher and student presentations can become a very rewarding learning experience.

3. Grade the formal oral presentation during the final weeks of class. Provide a list of the competencies and the grading scale on which students will be ranked during the formal report. (A sample copy is attached.) Use the formal written report that students prepare for the class as the basis for this report, and require that the visual aid be large enough or enlarged by a projector for the entire class to see clearly. The visual aid must be reduced and included in the written report. The formal typewritten reports should be written with the close supervision of the teacher. Also students may use the college writing center for extra help.

4. Videotape one of the short presentations. Save class time by having the videotape presentations made in the Audio-Visual Center or a separate room. Divide the class into small groups so that peers may evaluate each other along with the presentor as the tape is played back. A written report outlining

the strengths and weaknesses demonstrated by the presentor should be signed and turned in. All of those attending the presentation should sign the document.

5. Incorporate listening skills as an important part of oral communication. Encourage students to note details when listening to oral reports. Then when asking questions list the details pertaining to the question. Paraphrasing the message and restating clarify the ideas and opinions and verify that listening has occurred. If listening has not occurred, the opportunity for interchange will present itself so that the discrepancy can be cleared up.

6. Include impromptu speaking opportunities on light days. If a speaker does not come to class or if bad weather or illness keeps students away, use that time to have students make impromptu speeches to the class. Give extra credit for this kind of class participation.

CONCLUSION

Oral communication activities make the basic business communication course more exciting and significant. They help graduates get jobs and advance in them. Students with the ability to communicate clearly, effectively, and persuasively are in demand in business and industry, but acquiring these competencies is a formidable job expecially when it must be done in one basic course. Perhaps, through this report, teachers will find that a good deal can be done within the existing framework.

EVALUATION FORM FOR ORAL PRESENTATIONS

Student name_____ Class period_____

Topic_____ Date of presentation_____

		Scores				
		0	1	2	3	4
Organization						
Introduction						
1. Greet the audience	1.	___	___	___	___	___
2. Describe the topic	2.	___	___	___	___	___
3. Scope of report (What is in it?)	3.	___	___	___	___	___
4. Manner in which data was collected	4.	___	___	___	___	___
5. Manner in which data was analyzed	5.	___	___	___	___	___
Body						
6. Details about introduction	6.	___	___	___	___	___
7. Supporting information	7.	___	___	___	___	___
8. References cited where necessary	8.	___	___	___	___	___
9. Appropriateness of visuals	9.	___	___	___	___	___
Conclusion						
10. Review of major findings	10.	___	___	___	___	___
11. Concluding statement	11.	___	___	___	___	___
12. Question and answer period	12.	___	___	___	___	___
Content						
13. Ability to answer questions	13.	___	___	___	___	___
14. Complete information	14.	___	___	___	___	___
15. Accuracy of information	15.	___	___	___	___	___
Personal						
16. Body language	16.	___	___	___	___	___
17. Eye contact	17.	___	___	___	___	___
18. Business attire	18.	___	___	___	___	___
19. Enunciation	19.	___	___	___	___	___
20. Voice tone variation	20.	___	___	___	___	___
21. Overall knowledge of subject	21.	___	___	___	___	___
22. Use complete sentences	22.	___	___	___	___	___
Listening						
23. Paraphrase questions from class	23.	___	___	___	___	___
24. Repeat appropriate information	24.	___	___	___	___	___
25. Vocabulary appropriate to listeners	25.	___	___	___	___	___

Perfect score = 100

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